Lost & Found: *The German Curse in Russia* (USA, 1918)

In 2017, after years of research, fragments of a long-lost American film documenting one of the most tumultuous moments in world history resurfaced. Our discovery of footage from Donald C. Thompson's *The German Curse in Russia* provided an extraordinary window into the Russian Revolution of 1917—a pivotal upheaval that toppled the Tsarist regime, paved the way for Bolshevik rule, and reshaped global politics.

Ron van Dopperen and Cooper C. Graham

Donald Thompson (left) and Robert McCormick, sailing for Russia (1915). Courtesy Northwestern University.

The film, first released in New York in December 1917 and later distributed by Pathé in early 1918, was one of the few motion pictures to capture the chaos of the Russian Revolution as it unfolded. In an era when moving images were still rare, especially from war zones, Thompson's footage became a unique historical artifact—equal parts journalism, propaganda, and eyewitness testimony.

For decades, historians believed this remarkable film had vanished, known only through reviews and publicity stills. Its discovery within the Herman Axelbank collection, footage later repurposed for the documentary *From Tsar to Lenin*, reestablished Thompson as a crucial visual chronicler of the Russian Revolution. With his images, we can trace not only the trajectory of Russian politics in 1917 but also how international audiences perceived these events in real time.

Adventurer with a camera

Donald Thompson. Publicity picture reproduced from *Moving Picture World,* 4 November 1916

Donald C. Thompson (1884-1947) was a Kansas-born freelance photographer and journalist whose fearlessness and flair for drama and self-promotion defined his career. He was once pointedly described by journalist Charles Wheeler as “the last word in impertinence and gall when in 1914 he landed on the shore of Europe and asked where the war was at.”

By the time Thompson arrived in Petrograd in February 1917, he had already built a reputation for capturing daring images under fire. He initially covered the Great War in Belgium, France and Germany, often using unorthodox methods to gain access to the front. In 1915, Thompson’s footage was featured in *The German Side of the War*, produced by the *Chicago Tribune*. That same year, he joined publisher Robert R. McCormick of the *Chicago Tribune* for an assignment to Russia, filming the Eastern Front for *With the Russians at the Front*.

Thompson continued his film work in Romania and Serbia. He returned to the U.S. in late 1915 to present *Somewhere in France*, a film reportedly based on his time with the French Army. It gained attention for its graphic battlefield scenes. In 1916, he released his most ambitious work, *War as It Really Is*. Despite censorship and claims of impartiality, the film heavily favored the French and British perspective.

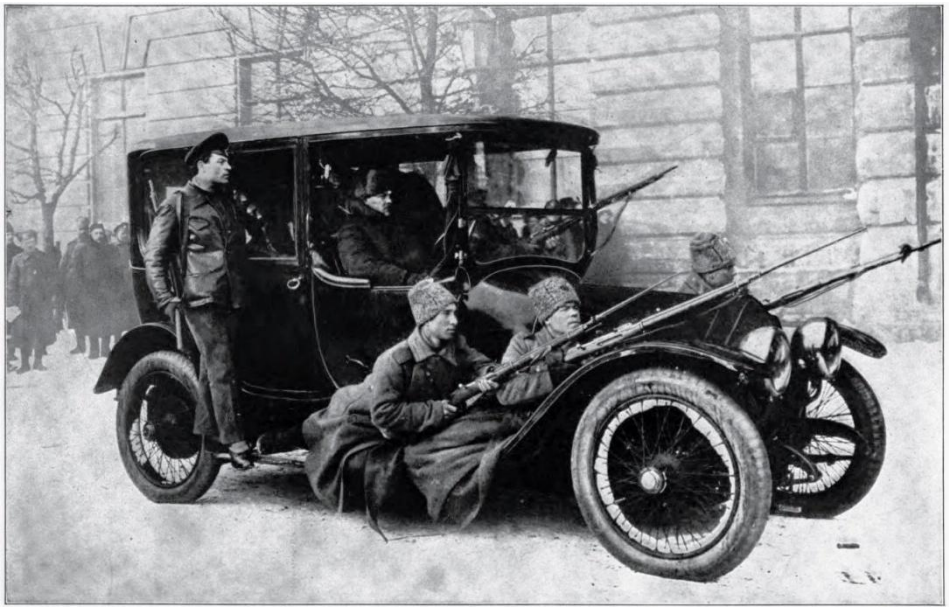
Thompson’s career blurred the line between journalism and propaganda. His photographs were widely circulated in American newspapers and magazines, and his motion pictures were screened across the United States, shaping public opinion about World War I and its combatants. His films, often accompanied by dramatic titles and patriotic narration, reflected his conservative views and his staunch support for the Allied cause.

Thompson’s visit to Russia in 1917 was initially intended as another wartime assignment for *Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly*, working alongside British correspondent Florence Harper. Instead, he found himself documenting a revolution. Armed with three trunks of photographic equipment and an Aeroscope motion picture camera powered by compressed air, Thompson traveled the Trans-Siberian Railway to Petrograd just days before strikes and protests erupted into open rebellion.

Witness to revolution

When Thompson arrived in Petrograd, food shortages and labor unrest gripped the city. On March 8 (February 23 in the old Russian calendar), International Women’s Day protests swelled into mass demonstrations. By March 12, regiments of the

Petrograd garrison mutinied, joining the striking workers. Thompson, sensing history in the making, began filming covertly, aware that the Okhrana (Tsarist secret police) also photographed demonstrators.



Duma messengers protected by armed car. Photograph taken by Thompson, copied from *Blood-Stained Russia* (1918)

His ingenuity allowed him to capture scenes others missed. He hid his camera in a bag, with only the lens visible, while the battery pack was concealed under his coat. These precautions helped him navigate the streets, but danger was ever-present. From the window of the Astoria Hotel, Thompson filmed soldiers firing on demonstrators. In one chilling moment, a woman who peeked through the curtains beside him was shot dead; Thompson carried her to the bathroom, where she died minutes later.

Within days, Nicholas II abdicated. The Tsar's fall astonished Thompson, who compared the revolution to France's in 1789. He continued to film events that followed, including the burial of February Revolution victims, May 1 Day demonstrations, and rallies organized by the Soviets.

While navigating the streets of Petrograd, Thompson relied heavily on his interpreter, Boris, who had been conscripted into the Tsarist army and was deeply disillusioned with the regime. Boris was invaluable in providing context to the turmoil, reporting on food shortages, strikes, and the presence of secret police provocateurs. Boris observed that many of the workers protesting in the streets were doing so without a clear understanding of their cause, but he also warned of foreign interference, including German spies. Despite rumors swirling around the revolution, Thompson trusted Boris's firsthand observations of street events and kept a critical eye on the larger political shifts.

Thompson was keenly aware of the power struggle between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet. He accurately assessed the political dynamics, including the influence of figures like Alexander Kerensky, even though his respect for the Tsar clouded his judgment regarding the abdication. Thompson believed that had the Tsar acted more decisively—by addressing the people's immediate needs, like securing food supplies and appointing new ministers—he could have maintained his rule.

Encounters with history

Thompson's photographs and films offer vivid glimpses of Russia's collapsing monarchy. In May 1917, he traveled to Tsarskoye Selo, where he filmed and photographed the deposed Tsar Nicholas II and his son walking in the gardens of the Alexander Palace. Thompson later recalled how Nicholas remained calm and courteous, even when jostled by guards.

His camera also turned toward Anna Vyrubova, the Empress's confidante and alleged Rasputin ally, imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress. Thompson photographed her walking with crutches in her cell, emphasizing her frailty. He documented a prison filled with former ministers, many awaiting trial without clear charges—images that captured the revolutionary government's uneasy grip on power.

Thompson also chronicled the rise of Lenin and Trotsky. On April 23, 1917, he noted Lenin's arrival in Petrograd by German train, immediately labeling him a German agent. As Lenin's popularity soared, Thompson's dispatches grew increasingly alarmed; he called for Lenin's arrest, predicting that "the day will come when everything here will be in his power."

At the frontline

Thompson with movie camera at the Dvinsk front, June 1917. Reproduced from *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly,* 20 October 1917

With credentials from Alexander Kerensky's Provisional Government, Thompson visited the Galician front in June 1917, filming combat footage from the Russian side of World War I. He used innovative techniques, such as raising a camera on a pole equipped with a motor and viewing through a periscope, to safely film over trenches. Despite initial optimism, the Russian offensive collapsed within weeks, and morale at the front deteriorated.

Returning to Petrograd, Thompson witnessed the July Days uprising, where protests devolved into street battles. In one encounter, he was briefly jailed, only to be freed when revolutionaries stormed the police station. He armed himself with a revolver and tied a red armband to his arm to avoid being shot—symbolically joining the revolution he was documenting. By August 1917, sensing imminent Bolshevik victory,

Thompson left Russia via Japan, smuggling his uncensored footage out of the country.

The German Curse in Russia

Premiering in December 1917, *The German Curse in Russia* was a five-reel silent film combining Thompson's Russian Revolution footage with a pointed political narrative. The opening title set the tone: "Since March 1917, the world believes that Russia treacherously forsook her allies, but records from my diary and camera will show that Russia's anarchy was not willed by her people, but was caused by vile German intrigue working in the unthinking masses." This framing reflected Thompson's conviction that Germany's intelligence operations, rather than Russian popular will, caused Russia's collapse.

The film opened with a menacing close-up of Kaiser Wilhelm II, introduced as "Emperor of all the Huns", whom American audiences by then recognized as cinema's archvillain. Reviewers noted Thompson's deliberate use of propaganda techniques: titles spelled "germany" without a capital letter, in contrast to "AMERICA", and scenes of chaos in Petrograd were juxtaposed with heroic images of Russian soldiers marching to the front.

British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst and Maria Bochkareva, commander of the 1st Women's Death Battalion. Movie scene filmed by Thompson, identified by the authors in *From Tsar to Lenin*.

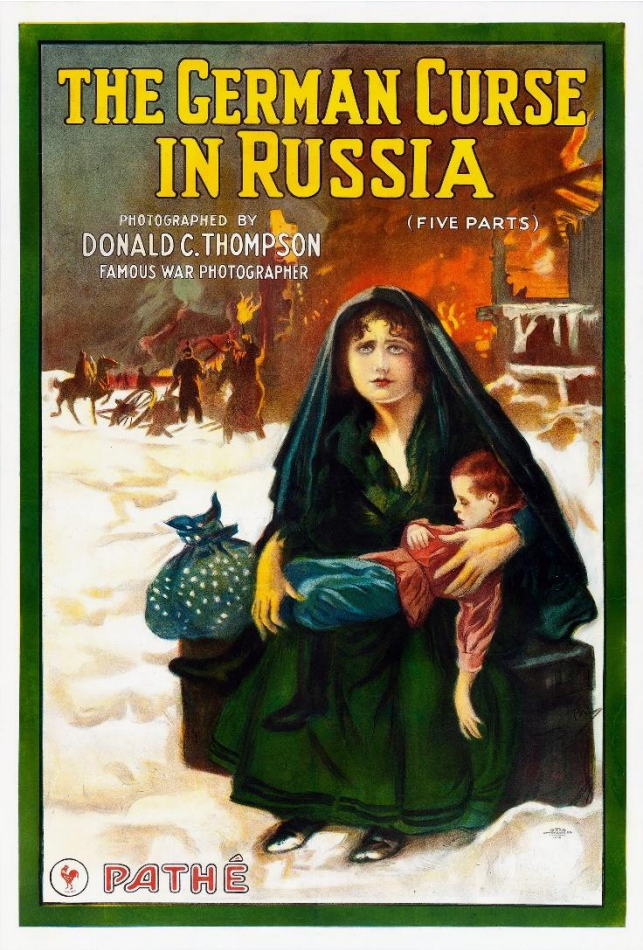
Among the film's most striking images were those of the Women's Death Battalions—female combat units formed in a desperate bid to inspire the demoralized Russian army. Thompson's still photographs and Axelbank's surviving footage confirm that he filmed commander Maria Bochkareva alongside British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst.

Other scenes that we were able to pinpoint, include funeral processions for revolution victims, Bolshevik May 1 Day rallies, Kronstadt sailors, and Petrograd street fighting. Some of the film's World War I combat scenes, once attributed to Russian cameramen, match Thompson's photographs from the Galician front, suggesting that he personally shot much of this rare material. The climactic scene in *The German Curse in Russia* contrasted a

close-up of Kaiser Wilhelm with a portrait of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. At the film's New York premiere, audiences wildly cheered Wilson's image, underscoring the film's propagandistic power.

Reception and legacy

Critics praised *The German Curse in Russia* for its vivid depiction of Russia's turmoil. *Motion Picture News* noted the film's "suggestion of chaos" as soldiers, civilians, and propagandists filled Petrograd's streets, while *Variety* reported that audiences roared with approval at its patriotic finale. For Americans entering World War I, the film offered both dramatic entertainment and reassurance: Russia's withdrawal from the war was portrayed not as betrayal but as a German-engineered tragedy.



Original full color film poster *The German Curse in Russia* (USA, 1918). Source Wikimedia Commons

For decades the film disappeared from sight until Herman Axelbank's extensive Russian film collection was researched. Surviving bills of sale from the 1920s in the inventory showed that the Jawitz Pictures Corporation – a stock film company based in New York – sold Axelbank footage taken by Thompson in Petrograd and Moscow in 1917. Segments from this original footage were later edited by Max Eastman into the celebrated documentary *From Tsar to Lenin* (1937). So, by recycling Thompson's war film at least part of this historic footage has been preserved. A number of movie scenes in the documentary were recognized by the authors by comparing Eastman's final cut with Thompson's still photographs and shooting style. The Axelbank collection, now at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, may contain more World War I film taken by Thompson, which definitely merits further research.

Though shaped by Thompson's anti-German bias and conservative politics, *The German Curse in Russia* remains one of the few contemporary visual records of the Russian Revolution's street battles, key figures, and atmosphere of upheaval. Its discovery not only enriches the historical record but also reminds us of the power of moving images to shape collective memory.

In Thompson's own time, his films were powerful propaganda tools. Today, stripped of their original intertitles and dramatic narration, they provide something even more valuable: a rare, unfiltered glimpse into a nation in collapse, preserved by an

American cameraman who operated his Aeroscope camera while bullets shattered the windows beside him.

Thompson's postwar journeys

Thompson's return to Russia in 1918, this time to document the American Red Cross during the Allied intervention in the Russian Civil War, marked the beginning of a new chapter in his globetrotting career. In 1920, he set off on an ambitious tour across Asia. With a portable film lab, Thompson recorded daily life in regions then rarely seen on Western screens—from Borneo to Mongolia and from the Philippines to China. In Bangkok, he filmed a 30-acre opium factory. Unfortunately, his footage of the plant was stolen.

Settling in California by the mid-1920s, Thompson never gave up the freelance spirit that had driven him through war zones and revolutions. He claimed to have filmed the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the Spanish Civil War, interviewed Hitler and Mussolini, and witnessed the assassination of Austrian Chancellor Dollfuss—though little evidence survives to confirm these extraordinary exploits.

Until his death in 1947, Thompson remained what he had always been: a self-styled eyewitness to history, propelled by wanderlust, bravado and an unwavering belief in the power of his camera. He was, as he confessed himself, a man with a simple philosophy: "I live only to make good pictures and enjoy life".

About the authors

Ron van Dopperen (left) studied history at the University of Utrecht, Holland, where he wrote his Master of Arts Thesis on the American World War I documentary films. Cooper C. Graham (right) is retired from the Library of Congress where he was a curator in the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division. He is the author of Leni Riefenstahl's "Olympia" and (in collaboration) D.W. Griffith and the Biograph Company.

Van Dopperen and Graham co-authored *Shooting the Great War: Albert Dawson and the American Correspondent Film Company* (2013) and together with Jim Castellan *American Cinematographers in the Great War* (2014)

Watch "*The German Curse in Russia*" (USA,1918)

https://youtu.be/z4MP6XSLpAM?si=LxoxfqljcWSKwzTV

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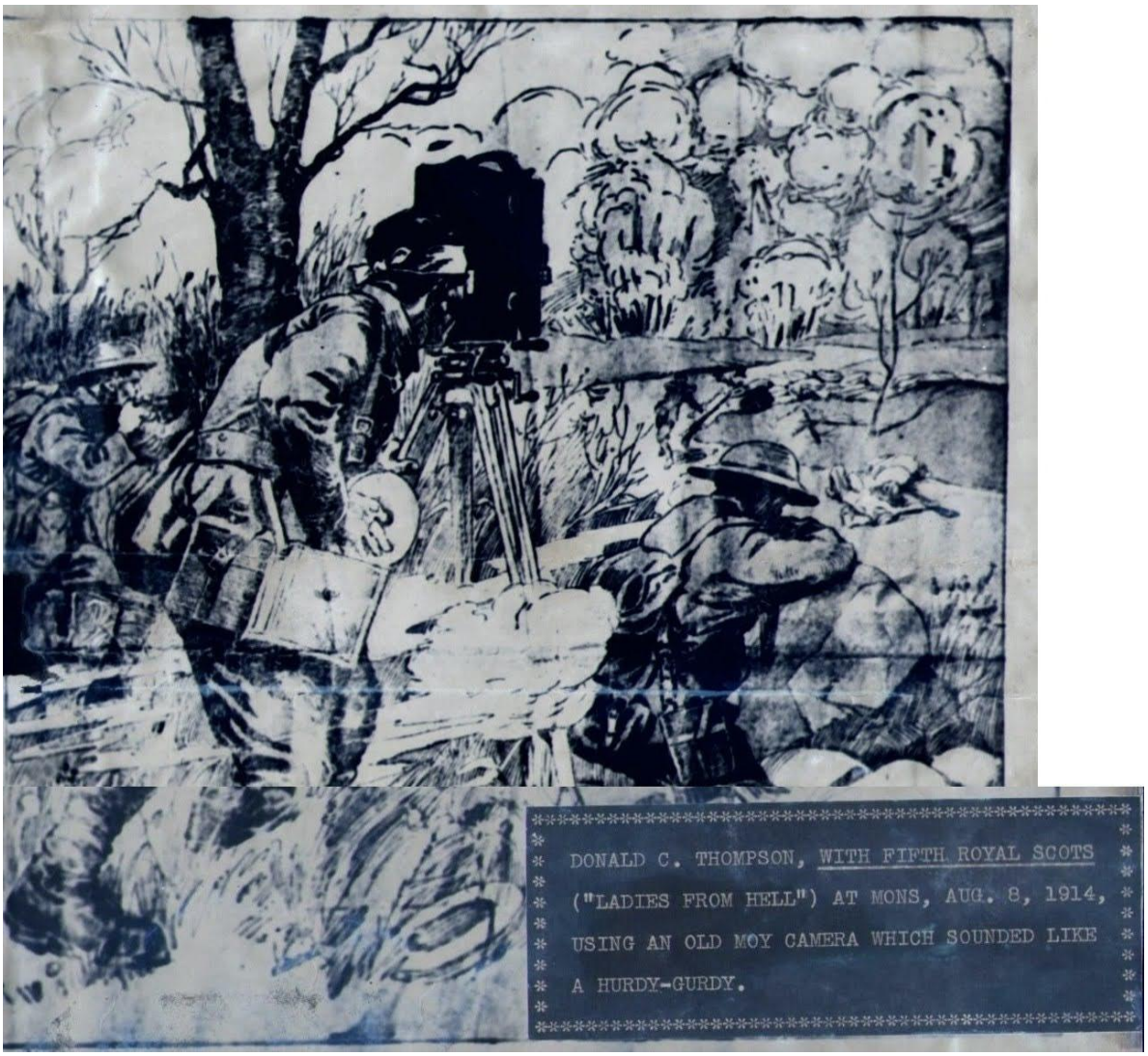

Thompson with the British army at Mons, August 1914. Artist impression found in a press clipping. Private collection Cooper Graham

Thomspon on top of a truck, filming the Russian revolution. Copied from *Blood-Stained Russia* (1918)